

Bus drivers at three companies in Greater Manchester begin strike action

By our reporters
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More than 2,000 UK bus drivers at three companies began a four-day strike across Greater Manchester Friday, after rejecting substandard pay offers. Further strikes are planned from September 30 to October 2.

Around two-thirds of services were affected. The strike coincided with a Saturday football match hosted by Manchester United and various concerts in the city.

The Unite union members are employed by private companies Stagecoach, Metroline and First Bus, which operate as franchises under the Bee Network. The Bee Network is coordinated by Transport for Greater Manchester (TfGM), under the control of the Greater Manchester Authority, comprising 10 councils, headed by Labour Party Mayor Andy Burnham.

The private companies make vast profits, at the expense of the low pay and poor conditions of their employees.

Burnham, touted as a future replacement for party leader Keir Starmer, issued a hardline statement siding with the companies. He said, “Proposals are on the table from the bus operators that would result in a significant lift in pay for some of our lowest-paid drivers and headline rates of pay for the rest that are among the best in the country.”

He urged “the strikes to be suspended for further talks”, appealing to “union representatives to work with us on that.” Ahead of the strike, Burnham pleaded poverty on behalf of the companies, declaring that the country and Greater Manchester “is not awash with money”.

At Stagecoach, 1,000 drivers across Oldham, Stockport and Middleton depots rejected a 3.5 percent offer. Another 1,000 drivers at Metroline Manchester threw out the same deal at Sharston, Hyde Road, Ashton and Wythenshawe depots. At First Bus in Rochdale, 110 workers initially turned down a 6

percent offer. They are the lowest paid bus drivers in the region on £15 an hour.

Multinational company Stagecoach operates buses, coaches, trams and trains. Its UK profits rose to £51 million last year while the company offered drivers a below inflation 3.5 percent increase. The RPI (retail price index) inflation rate stands at 4.6 percent.

Drivers in Oldham on an over 100-strong picket near the Metro tram stage spoke to WSWs reporters.

One driver remarked on the “good level of support from the public. We’ve handed out 1,000 leaflets.”

A driver for over 30 years said, “They’ve been messing us about since April. We were initially offered 56p [an hour rise]! There’s enough money to give drivers a good wage. They [management] can afford to give themselves a pay rise every year.

Describing the stressful conditions at work, he said, “What the public don’t realise about my job, some days it’s fantastic, but some days are horrendous. I’m supposed to be a company ambassador, revenue collector, security, all these different hats. But I’m the first person they drag in for a disciplinary.

“Some of these routes end up in places like Uppermill where there are no facilities such as toilets. When I get to the terminus, I walk up and down for circulation—I’ve known drivers who’ve suffered with deep vein thrombosis. I’m allowed to drive for 10 hours over 16 hours but if you hit traffic or accidents, you are working over hours.”

Referencing Burnham’s pledge to standardise drivers’ pay across the region by 2028, the driver said, “One of Burnham’s promises was we’re going to give everyone the same minimum pay. We have to push Andy Burnham into a corner. But if a politician said it was nice outside, I’d go and have a look. They all piss in the same pot.”

A driver who has worked for Stagecoach for over a decade, explained, “It’s hard to live, given the cost of living, we need better pay to survive. The companies are making a huge amount of money; it’s always been like that. They give us an ultimatum—take the offer or leave.”

WSWS reporters raised the necessity of workers employed within the bus conglomerates making links with each other internationally as part of a rank-and file fightback. The driver agreed, saying, “This company’s massive, Stagecoach is in Australia, and they’re filling their own pockets.”

Metroline employs 1,000 drivers working out of the Hyde Road, Ashton, Sharston and Wythenshawe depots. Its parent company ComfortDelGro, based in Singapore, made profits of £60 million from its subsidiaries in the UK and Europe in the first half of 2025.

At the company’s Hyde Road depot, a striker explained that workers had not had a pay rise in two years. They were paid just £17 an hour. “I think we should be getting at least £20 an hour for our job. It is not just driving we do. We have to check the bus is safe before it goes out and then have to get to the starting destination. We have to stick to the times and then go back to the depot, cash up and sign off.”

Another driver pointed to the WSWS article “Bus drivers at three Greater Manchester companies to take four days of strike action” and said, “I was amazed to read at how much profits the bus companies are making.”

Another said, “We are not asking for much. Some of us have mortgages and three kids at home. We have to pay the bills and do the shopping. Whether you are a Birmingham council worker or a lorry driver. We all face the same costs.” Metroline are “squeezing everything out of us, but not giving anything back. There is no respect towards us. There is a lot of stress in this job. We get fatigue and that how accidents happen, due to a lack of concentration.”

Asked his thoughts on Burnham’s statement backing the bus companies he replied, “Burnham is a hypocrite. According to him, it’s supposed to be a good public network now but it’s still private bus companies taking money off the public.”

At First Bus in Rochdale, the 110 drivers rejected an “improved” pay offer of 8.8 percent over two years.

They currently earn £15 an hour, the lowest in the region. First Bus along with First Rail are part of the UK-wide FirstGroup, recording operating profits last year of £204 million.

One of the around 40 pickets derided the Labour government under Starmer. “They’re on their way to ruining the country. First, we had Tony Blair who kept the zero-hours contract, now we’ve got another right-wing government. We want pay parity.

“The strike’s not just about pay but conditions like timetables. When they do timetables, they don’t consider the massive increases in traffic with all the housebuilding in Manchester. It’s very stressful, and some drivers are over 70 and still working.”

Unite General Secretary Sharon Graham said, “All of the firms involved in this dispute are highly profitable—but their workers are denied a fair wage while their employers line their pockets.”

This is said while Unite makes no call for taking public transport out of the hands of the profiteers, instead demanding a place for the union bureaucracy alongside the council leaders and company executives as they discuss further extending franchising across England and Wales. Bee Network workers should establish a joint strike committee across the companies independent of the Unite bureaucracy, as a first step to widening the fight for wages and conditions—linked to taking control and ownership of transport out of the hands of parasitic companies.



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